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William Gordon McCabe

A BRIEF MEMOIR

BY

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Historical Society

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William Gordon McCabe was born in Richmond, Virginia, August 4, 1841, and died there June 1, 1920. There he spent a large part of his life; and to the historic city, rich in memories of all that has been Virginian, he gave a loyal and lasting affection.

He was the son of the Reverend John Collins McCabe, D. D., also a native of Richmond, and a friend of Edgar Allan Poe during his editorship of "*The Southern Literary Messenger*," to which Dr. McCabe was a frequent contributor.

His record as a soldier of the Confederacy, whose fortunes he espoused when a lad at the University of Virginia and followed until Johnston surrendered to Sherman at Greensboro, had its prototype in that of his great-grandfather, James McCabe, an officer of the Revolution, who served the Continental cause with conspicuous gallantry throughout the period of the war, and who had led his men in the column under Montgomery, through a driving snow storm, in the assault on Quebec in December, 1775, and caught in his arms his dying commander as he fell.

If it was from his Revolutionary progenitor that Gordon McCabe, as his friends all called him, inherited some part of his military tendencies and talents, so from his father, Dr. John Collins McCabe, appears to have been transmitted to him a measure of that passionate pursuit of letters,—“the noble and simple presentation of things noble and simple”—which was an essential feature of his long career.

Dr. McCabe, a militant churchman, born November 12th, 1820, after studying medicine, entered the Episcopal ministry, and served at various times many churches, notably those at Smithfield and Hampton, Virginia. He was an indefatigable student and literary man, loving books and the investigation of old records, a poet, an essayist and an antiquarian. When

the great civil conflict of the 'Sixties began, Dr. McCabe resigned a parish charge in Maryland, entered the Confederate service as chaplain of the 32nd Virginia Regiment in the Peninsula, and afterwards became chaplain-general to the military prisons in Richmond. He survived the Confederacy, and died in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, in 1875.

During his youthful association with his father, to whom he was devoted with the singular attachment which illustrated his domestic life and his many friendships, young McCabe breathed in an atmosphere of books and reading and good talk; for the clergyman encouraged his son's literary instinct, and had a fine library; and he entertained in his hospitable home a multitude of friends and visitors, who were representative of the best in the social life of the Virginia of that day. From him the boy learned first, what he always kept foremost in school and army and university and at the teacher's desk: "to ride, to shoot and to speak the truth"; and, for a close second, he cherished a love of literary things. He was accustomed to say that among the earliest memories of his childhood was that of lying face downward on the floor, propped upon his elbows, with an open volume between them, too big for him to hold, reading untiringly; and he would insist with great earnestness that no one ever caught "the divine fire" of letters, who had not begun to "follow the gleam" after some such early fashion.

His mother was Sophia Gordon Taylor, a great-granddaughter of George Taylor, signer of the Declaration of Independence, for whose civic story he felt and exhibited great filial and patriotic pride.

Sophia Gordon Taylor was sprung on the distaff side from the emigrant, Lewis Gordon, who was an influential citizen of Easton, Pennsylvania, and who came of a line of Galloway Scots that has adorned Border ballad and legend and history with the romance and adventure of "The Gay Gordons" of Earlston, Lochinvar and Kenmure. Of this Scottish strain in his veins he was very proud; and to those bearing the name or inheriting the blood it was his delight to declaim, with the fervor and stirring intonation that went with whatever he

recited or read aloud, the ballad-lines which enshrine the memory of the Jacobite Viscount William Gordon of Kenmure, who lost his head on Tower Hill, after "The 'Fifteen":

"Here's Kenmure's health in wine, Willie,
Here's Kenmure's health in wine!
There ne'er was a coward o' Kenmure's blude,
Nor yet o' Gordon's line."

One of the grandsons of Lewis Gordon, of Easton, was William Lewis Gordon, a distinguished officer in the United States Navy, who for gallantry in the War of 1812 with Great Britain was voted by the Commonwealth of Virginia a sword of honor. William Gordon McCabe was named for this sailor grand-uncle who had adopted Sophia Gordon Taylor after the death of her mother.

The first ten years of his life were spent at Smithfield, Isle of Wight County, Virginia, where his father was the rector in charge of the parish whose history goes back to 1632. This was the time when he began to read the big books on elbows; and here was first kindled the enthusiasm for "what is fine in human kind, that ruled his choice of books" and lasted him through life.

The following six years he spent at Hampton, where Dr. McCabe was rector of St. John's Church, in a parish hardly less ancient and rich in historical associations than that at Smithfield, where as early as the year 1667, the parish records tell of "the new church of Kickotan." Here he attended the Hampton Academy, and received instruction at the hands of its scholarly principal, the late Col. John B. Cary, whose daughter, Gillie Armistead, became his second wife. At Hampton Academy, where he was a pupil for two years, he made a distinct impression on both school and teachers as a youth of uncommon intellectuality, of great eagerness to learn, and of unwearying industry; and when he left its walls he carried with him its highest honors, having won its gold medal twice and been its "valedictorian" upon his graduation in 1858. At this time he was already "as packed with energy, as fiery

in hope," as he continued to the winter of his age; and his lasting possession of these qualities even unto his end, keeping him always youthful in spirit, gave for those who knew him best a finer interpretation and a nobler meaning to the Greek apothegm that "whom the gods love die young."

After his graduation from the Hampton Academy he was private tutor in the family of the Seldens of Westover; and there, in the midst of associations dedicated to exalting memories of much that was finest in the story of Colonial Virginia, we see him inaugurating his career as a writer of distinction with contributions to "*The Southern Literary Messenger*," beginning with a poem of unusual merit from a youth, written in 1858: "To my Alma Mater: Academia Hamptonensis," and signed "An Old Boy," which was published in the July, 1859, number. This was followed by a series of historical essays and poems and stories, which were printed in the "*Messenger*" from time to time during his University career, and even while he was a soldier in the trenches.

One can but believe that these early years at Smithfield and Hampton and Westover, lived in an atmosphere of inspiring memories and associations, and in constant contact with the highminded and cultivated gentlemen and gentlewomen of a golden age in Virginia, exercised an unconscious influence in fixing for him that lofty attitude toward life which struck the minds of his acquaintances with its loyalty, its manliness, its buoyant courage, its love of letters and of friends, and its indefinable charm of interest in the movement of the world.

An incident of this contact with high thoughts and fine idealisms is in a little story of simplicity and generosity and loyalty, which he never tired of telling. One day, when riding with a neighbor of the Seldens, a prominent country doctor, who had once known affluence, but was then in reduced circumstances and compelled at an advanced age to return to the practice of his profession in order to support his family, the old gentleman drew rein, and pointing with his riding switch to where the James River "low-grounds" lay golden with the ripening harvest as far as the eye could reach, said to him:

"All these acres were once mine. I lost them by endorsing for a friend and neighbor. He was a noble gentleman, and had he ever been able, he would have repaid me every cent."

In the autumn of 1860 he entered the University of Virginia. Here his time was short, for on the night of the 17th of April, 1861, the day when the Virginia Convention dissolved the Commonwealth's association with the other States of the Federal Union, he set out with "The Southern Guard," a military company of fellow students, for Harper's Ferry, and remained thenceforward a soldier of the Confederacy, until the sun had set on the long and heroic struggle.

Of the incidents of his life as a soldier, there is no room to write here. Entering the service as a private, he became in succession first lieutenant and captain of artillery. From Harper's Ferry to Appomattox and Greensboro, he served through the gigantic campaigns of that array of "tattered uniforms and bright muskets," "which for four years carried the Revolt on its bayonets," with a constancy, a fidelity and a devotion that were unexcelled. The details of his service would fill a narrative of hard-fought battles, of weary marches, of suffering and self-denial, of gallant and enthusiastic courage, of unfaltering purpose, of pride and exultation in dearly won victories, of uncomplaining fortitude in defeat. But no shadow of regret, no thought of apology ever crossed his quenchless spirit, when time had made plain the ineffectuality of it all. From Appomattox until death he championed with eloquent tongue and busy pen the cause he had fought for in "Our War," whose events remained always outlined before his memory with the clear simplicity of some immortal legend.

In the years "after the War" he made many warm friends among the best of those who had once been his foes; but to them he yielded not even a tacit surrender of his convictions. And they in turn, won by his genuineness, his enthusiasm, his loyalties, if unconvinced by his accurate knowledge, his ready wit and quick resourcefulness, accorded to him the ungrudging recognition of his sincerity. "To the kindest soul who ever cursed or killed a Yankee," wrote one of these Northerners on a photograph which he gave him.

He loved to think and to read and to talk of the Confederacy and of the heroic deeds of its defenders; and in later life he numbered among his closest associates many who had been of its civil and military leaders. His enthusiasms about it extended in unexpected directions. "I have been trying for months to find the name of the man who wrote 'The Barefooted Boys,'" he once said; and then he repeated with indescribable expression the lines of the poem, telling

"How the South on a time
Stormed the ramparts of hell
With her barefooted boys."

He was never satisfied until he got at the bottom of any question concerning the war, and either proved or disproved it; whereupon his catholicity of spirit rested satisfied with the incontrovertible conclusion. He was as eager and as interested in his demonstration in the press that "All quiet along the Potomac" was written, not by a southerner but by a northern woman, as he was to prove by meticulous evidence that Whittier's "Barbara Frietchie" was based on an alleged incident that never could have occurred. He ranked, with those competent to judge, as a military critic of high order, and his "Defence of Petersburg" is regarded as a war classic. Among some of his most notable articles published in the English periodicals were papers on questions arising out of the War. He held Lee and Jackson and Stuart and their compeers in adoring memory; and he taught his little grandchildren, in his afternoon drives with them along Monument avenue in Richmond, reverently to salute, as he himself never failed to do, Mercier's noble equestrian statue of the great Confederate Commander. In his letters to his friends allusions and references to the Confederacy and to incidents of the struggle repeatedly occurred; and when he gave them books that bore in any direction upon its story, it was his pride and delight to write on the flyleaf of the volume, in the fine Oxford hand that marked the scholar and man-of-letters: "From W. Gordon McCabe, formerly Captain of Artillery, Pegram's Battalion, A. P. Hill's Corps, A. N. V."

Yet with all his unforgetting loyalty to old memories, he was none the less loyal to the later duties and obligations of the highest citizenship under a reconciled and restored Union. No one took a larger or more eager interest in the success of the Allies and America in the World War, in which his youngest son, a colonel in the United States Army, served with distinguished gallantry; but he regarded with scant respect the idea that it was a war "to make the world safe for democracy,"—holding rather that it was fought in defense and vindication of the honor and the interest of the American Republic, as "Our War" had been fought for constitutional liberty, and for homes and hearthstones.

In October, 1865, he opened "The University School" at Petersburg, Virginia, and continued it there until he removed it in 1895 to the larger field of Richmond. One of his former pupils, on the occasion of the presentation in 1903, two years after the school was finally closed, to the University of Virginia by his "Old Boys" of a portrait of its "Head Master," painted in London by the celebrated artist, Walter Urwick, described him as he was when he began his career as school-teacher:

"Well do I remember him; a small, live, wiry, active man physically, almost a boy in appearance; full of life, enthusiasm, mental activity, accomplishments and ability; deeply interested in his work, with the highest ideals upon all subjects, and with rare power to maintain discipline and conduct his school, the latter doubtless due to his experience as an officer in the army; a disciplinarian in the school-room, yet a player on the baseball nine of his older boys; and in and out of the school always recognizing and treating each boy as a gentleman, and out of school as his equal and companion." In his annual school-catalogue his announcement of the school's discipline was as concise as its enforcement was invariable: "The discipline is strict. The honour system—(honor spelled always with the *u*, after the English fashion)—obtains entirely in the management of the school, and the only punishment for deviation from that system is expulsion." To his pupils he taught, as for himself he held,

"That Life may go, if Honor stay";

and "the honour system" soon developed the honor habit in them. During his long experience he sent forth from the school many of whom he had made scholars, but he sent out very many more of whom he had made gentlemen.

In a letter of his to Charles Foster Smith, reproduced in a paper on "Southern Colleges" in the *"Atlantic Monthly,"*—in which a place among the best is accorded McCabe's University School,—he wrote:

"I announced to the school that I should take every fellow's word as being as good as my own, and that in all matters touching personal honor a boy should be treated as any other gentleman; but if after such consideration on my part, he in any way forfeited his word, or even tampered with it, that he should not associate with me, nor with his honorable fellows. I drew the big fellows very closely to me. I was 'pitcher' on the school 'nine,' and was happy one day when I accidentally overheard a boy say to another, as a knot of them were discussing some point of honor: 'Well, I think any fellow who would tell McCabe a lie is a dirty blackguard'."

The scholarship of the University School was of the highest; and from its doors went into the Universities and the world a host of young men, who later became eminent as teachers and professors and ministers and lawyers and physicians, and who illustrated in their subsequent careers its lofty standards of learning and of life. Here his most significant work was done, and from it he derived the rich reward of a modest satisfaction in the conscious impression of his own personality upon the youths who had come under his tutelage. "The Old Man," as they called him, always felt that he had done his part by "the Boys."

During this school-period he was constantly busy with his pen, and achieved enviable distinction as scholar and editor and author. He contributed essays and papers of recognized merit to leading magazines and newspapers; and the foremost English periodicals, such as *"The Saturday Review,"* *"The Acad-*

emy," and "*The Oxford and Cambridge Review*" gladly welcomed his articles on literary and military topics. He edited dictionaries and cyclopedias, and the writings of classical authors, he was "literary adviser" to great publishing-houses, he wrote Latin Grammars, and won fame among classical scholars as a Latinist "of exact and penetrating scholarship"; he collected and edited books of ballads; his multifarious knowledge and boundless energy found outlet in many directions in the world of letters; while he gave evidence of his ability and stirring eloquence as a speaker in a wide and versatile series of occasional addresses and speeches.

He was a poet of no ordinary gifts, and his poems, for the most part written in war-time and characterized by a lyric fire and genuine poetic expression, have found a place in the leading anthologies of America. In his later years, while President of the Virginia Historical Society, he gave in his annual "Reports" a long line of biographies of members of the Society who had died during his incumbency, which are unusual in their literary character, and as distinctive within their limits for charm of style and sureness of touch as are the gentle "Essays of Elia"—"a well of English undefyled."

He was "*intus et in cute*," the finest type of the Virginian of his generation, saturated with the history of Colony and Commonwealth, and carrying at his fingers' ends the innumerable details of their story. In his great library, teeming with first editions and with autographed volumes, the gifts of many friends who were writers throughout the English speaking world, his wonderful collection of "Virginiana" held first place; and his delight in adding to it ceased only with his end. His collection of manuscripts was no less remarkable than his books; and among them are hundreds of personal letters written to him by many of the foremost authors and soldiers and statesmen of America and England.

Space fails for even a bald and austere catalogue of the societies, associations and organizations of which he was a member, and in most of which he held high official position. He was President of the Westmoreland Club of Richmond, where a generous and lavish Virginian hospitality has long

abounded; of the "Society of the Sons of the Revolution in Virginia"; of the "Society of the Cincinnati in Virginia," and of the "Society of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence"; and for several of them he was historiographer or historian-general. Among these organizations in which his distinction as scholar and soldier and orator gave him place, his affections and interest were most strongly centered upon the "Virginia Historical Society," of which he long held the office of President,—a position that he occupied at the time of his death. In its congenial work and its eminent accomplishments he had a constant pride, and on it he bestowed his continuing devotion, his latest activities and many generous benefactions.

His collegiate and University degrees included that of Master of Arts, *honoris causa*, from the venerable College of William and Mary in Virginia, which also conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws; that of Master of Arts, *honoris causa*, from Williams College, Massachusetts; and the Doctorate of Letters from Yale.

For his own *alma mater*, the University of Virginia, which confers no honorary diplomas, but which had given him the incommunicable decoration of soldiership among her students, and of scholarship upon her rolls, he felt an abiding affection; and he served her loyally as student, as alumnus, and as official Visitor.

But after all else is said of his honors, his illustrious friendships, his scholastic and literary achievements, and his varied experiences of life, it was the personal human side of him that was his most meaning and attractive possession. He had a genius for friendship. Wherever he went, whether to private home or club, in America or in England, his coming was hailed with delight by those who greeted him. His knowledge of what was best in books and in people, his charm as a talker, his unchallenged gift as a story-teller, his winning and kindly humor, his "keen sense of language and its imperial influence on men," the spell of his cheerfulness and ancient courtesy,—every grace and attraction that sprung from a fine sincerity, a generous sympathy, a warm heart, and a noble intellectual in-

dependence, won for him a wide range of associates and friends among both gentle and simple.

In his domestic life he was all that husband and father could be in affection and unselfish devotion. His first wife, who was the mother of his children, and in every thought and deed his "helpmeet," was Jane Pleasants Harrison Osborne, whom he married April 9, 1867, and who died November 22, 1912. As elsewhere stated, he married, second, March 16, 1915, Gillie Armistead Cary, who had been, in his boyhood, his junior schoolmate and youthful companion, and who survives him.

He had travelled much and in many lands, and had many intimate friends among the most intellectual men and women of his time; and he was cosmopolite in the variety of his interests, his experiences and his acquaintanceships.

He lived a busy and useful and generous life; and left wherever he passed unforgettable memories in the hearts of those along the way who learned to know him; and he died—after exceeding the allotted span of the Psalmist—as he had wished to die: not lingering, but quickly, as they who pass in battle. He never grew old in thought or feeling; and his pursuits, his enthusiasms, his freshness of outlook upon life, were only quenched in death.

So, as R. L. S. wrote of his preceptor, Fleeming Jenkin, "he passed; but something in his gallant vitality had impressed itself upon his friends, and still impresses. Not from one or two only, but from many, I hear the same tale of how imagination refuses to accept our loss and instinctively looks for his reappearing, and how memory retains his voice and image like things of yesterday."

(NOTE.—This paper was prepared at the request of the Executive Committee of the Virginia Historical Society.)